

Open Veins: Spirits of Violence and Grief in Venezuela

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ABSTRACT: Transnational processes of stigmatization and criminalization of poverty associated to neoliberal models of development unfold locally in various modalities and intensities of depacification of everyday life. In this framework, this paper presents the case study of a well known spirit possession devotion in Venezuela, the cult of María Lionza, where the enormous symbolic, structural and repressive pressure exerted on shantytown dwellers, particularly male youngsters, is recycled --in a sort of corporeal videoclip-- in a cluster of controversial and highly spectacular ritual practices based on self-mutilation and bloodletting. Using Eduardo Galeano's celebrated dictum of the 'Open Veins of Latin America,' taken in this paper both metaphorically and literally, these intense rituals are understood as deeply embodied roadmaps to everyday violence and stigma, in the context of *barrio* --shantytown-- male youth cultures and reelaborations of popular memories of slavery and legendary sagas.

KEY WORDS: social exclusion, male youth cultures, everyday violence, shantytowns, embodiment, social memory, popular religion, Venezuela.

The ghosts of all the strangled and betrayed revolutions throughout Latin America's tortured history show up in new experiences, just as the present times were presaged and engendered by the contradictions of the past.

Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*

Eyes without weeping, throats without sobs, eyes turning into scar tissue, hands turning into rheumatic stumps in the cold fog. Each wound, each scar, each laceration left by the storms, the brush, the stumblings, the falls, the infections and the blows stiffens the flesh, making it the more mute and inexpressive. The wounds are only the endurance, the ineffaceability of pain. They open only upon themselves, and upon more pain. They open upon a body that is a lesion in the tissue of words and discourses and in networks of power.

Alphonso Lingis, *Abuses (Tawantinsuyu)*

(PIC 1 ABOUT HERE)

Drums, Allegories and Blood in the Jungle

Sorte mountain (Yaracuy, Venezuela), the main center of pilgrimage of the María Lionza cult of spiritist possession. Easter, 1994. Morrongo, a boy from the Las Mangos neighborhood of La Vega, Caracas, barely fifteen years old, arrived at the mountain with a group of friends identified by my companions as *malandros* — delinquents. They soon shook him off, and he began to wander silently among the altars that were being installed at the foot of the mountain. Morrongo's story immediately caught the attention of the *marialionceros* who were arriving at the sanctuary, and he soon became an allegory torn from the everyday violence of turn-of-the-century Venezuela. The senseless tragedy of Morrongo, so appalling and yet so common, passed from conversation to conversation. Some shared their food with him. Others put him up for the night. The younger mediums promised curative ceremonies with their most powerful spirits, the polemic Vikings and Africans. For some time Morrongo had been a street child. Six months before his journey to Sorte he had been shot in the back four or five times in his neighborhood by a youngster wearing a hood. Although he survived the 'assault,' the aftermath had been dramatic. He lost his memory, could only mumble a few words, and could no longer read or write. His right arm was paralyzed, and he walked with difficulty, always looking straight ahead. The scars left by some of the bullets in his body were evident. One of the bullets still stood out on the upper part of his skull, visible to all who paid attention. As if it were a miraculous relic, some approached cautiously to touch it.

On the second day of his stay on the mountain, Morrongo was the protagonist of a spectacular ceremony. It was afternoon on Sorte. The nervous movement of mediums and ritual assistants, or *bancos*, the altar covered with figurines of spirits, candles, liquors, flowers and fruits, the still intact symbols marked on the floor with talcum powder, the obsessive charging of drums: all announce the beginning of a ceremony in one of the ritual spaces, or *portales*, situated next to the river. Two young *materias* — mediums — wearing only red shorts prepare themselves for the trance. Somewhere between fifty and sixty mainly young people from all corners of Venezuela look on. One of the mediums stands before the altar and begins his trance in a dramatic way. The spirit who comes — Erik the Red — possesses him with great violence, from bottom to top, like a hand fitting slowly and precisely into a glove. First one leg, then the other, then an arm and one side of the body, finally the other. Next his facial features harden, his eyes grow very wide, and a fierce, sustained cry tears from his throat. After the initial impact, the *materia* rapidly contorts his body (PIC 2 ABOUT HERE). He raises his

arms to the sky and begins to walk with convulsions, still shouting. Suddenly there are needles in his face, and after repeatedly cutting himself with a razor blade passed to him by one of his ritual aids or *bancos*, the blood begins flowing down his forearms and chest. Meanwhile, the second *materia*, José Luis, falls flat on his back on the floor with violence. His back begins to rise up from the tension, then blood and the electrifying scream of the Africans and Vikings erupt from his mouth. The spirit Eriko has arrived in his body, and the medium soon gets to his feet, his chin dripping red. Among the crowd, and pushed by the drums and the palms of their assistants, Erik the Red and Eriko turn to face each other. Lifting their arms and twisting slightly from the waist, they study each other, evaluating the initial injuries. Both mediums are bathed in blood, trying to establish preponderance over the other. They begin to move around the area with the spasmodic, uncontrolled 'skeleton' walk characteristic of these spirits. A little later, seated next to the patient, the mediums intensify the cycle of self-inflicted injury. Razors cut the tongue, the thorax, the forearms, the thighs. Long needles held with strips of red rag pierce cheeks, eyebrows, and in the case of José Luis, the neck, threatening the jugular. Cheered on by all present, the mediums begin the *curación* [treatment] of Morrongo, who is stretched out on the floor in a ritual circular space marked out with talcum powder, surrounded with colored candles. A strangely dissonant episode takes place. The spirits call a child to caress the patient's head. An elderly woman sits next to him and slowly reads to him from the bible in a low voice. The entranced mediums delicately trace his body, concentrating on the paralyzed arm and leg, rose petals held between the fingers of their bloody hands. Now, silence reigns, interrupted only by the terse instructions of the spirits to their *bancos*, and the continuous sounds of evening falling in the jungle. As darkness comes the mediums ready themselves for the "return to earth." The end of José Luis's trance is unnerving. He twists, coughing with great violence. There are some comments that he will not live much longer if he does not moderate the intensity of his relationship with the African and Viking spirits. Some time later, now out of the trance but his body still stained with dried blood, he becomes embroiled in a dispute with soldier from the National Guard on duty watching the ceremony. He spends the next three days in the lock-up. As tens of thousands of *marialionceros* flow into the mountain for the Easter ceremonies, Morrongo vanishes into the crowd.

In spite of its peculiarities, the ceremony just described does not stand out from the realm of turn-of-the-century Venezuelan spiritism. Together with the spirits of delinquents who died in streets fights or police operatives (Ferrándiz, 2004b), since their appearance in the early nineties it is the African and Viking spirits who attract most of the younger *marialionceros* of all the spirits in the pantheon, dominating the practice today. In Sorte mountain just as in urban ceremonies, especially in the groups dominated by younger *materias*, the spirits of the Indians, liberators, doctors or peasants who were predominant for at least the last fifty

years have given way to the Africans and Vikings, both composing a spiritist and bodily cluster difficult to discern. This sudden and radical transformation of the corporeal characteristics of the cult (described in greater detail below) is unquestionably linked to the intensification of structural and day-to-day violence in the more impoverished sectors of Venezuelan society which populate the so-called misery belts surrounding the principal cities. As shall also be seen, this increase particularly affects the youth of the *barrios* (shantytowns). On this point it is worth asking: What is occurring in Venezuelan society that gives rise to groups of young people from poor neighborhoods who, within the framework of a widely followed popular religious practice, consider it legitimate and even prestigious to inflict wounds on themselves and manipulate their own blood in the context of public rituals? How may we understand a form of juvenile violence that at first glance prompts, even among many spiritists, terms such as ‘aberrant’, ‘gratuitous’, ‘irrational’, ‘fictitious’, ‘uninformed’, ‘immoderate’? To answer these questions it is necessary to analyze broader circumstances taking place in the country and in Latin America at the beginning of the nineties, when these mystical entities erupted into Venezuelan spiritism with such force.

Youth on the Respirator

The African spirits have enormous strength... It really seems that they will break all one's bones. It's barbaric. (...) When you come out of the trances you feel like someone has bashed your head, your whole body. Listen, when I started to develop myself [as a spiritist], that was such a strong trip that, when the spirits left—how can I explain?—*to me it seemed that here [in the chest] I had one of those plastic tubes to breath... One of the six-inch ones.* That's right, my chest stayed open like this: afff, afff, afff... That was something so incredible, really strong, and I was like that for days, like I'd been beaten with sticks. My whole body hurt.

With these words Daniel recounted to me the dominant sensation remaining after being possessed by one of these violent spirits. The pronounced asphyxia that they provoke in the mediums causes the heart-rending howls with which they try to expel the deepest air in the early phases of the trance as sometimes happens when imbalances of possession arise. Daniel's description of a beaten body, suffocated and in need of a respirator to go on living, is a very apt metaphor for the intense marginalization, lack of opportunity, and violence in various forms — from external to self-inflicted— that must be faced in the daily lives of many of the youth of the Venezuelan *barrios*.¹ There are plenty of motives behind this deeply

¹ For a life history and body itinerary of Daniel, taken as paradigmatic of the everyday lives of many young mediums, see Ferrándiz 2004a, chap 3.. As it is the case with Daniel, the practice of spiritism can transform into one more survival strategy in the informal economy, popularly known as *rebusque* in Venezuela. For an analysis of some of Daniel's disciples as a ‘survival group’ organized around spiritism in the shantytown of Las Mayas, Caracas, see also Ferrándiz, 2002.

embodied distress. Recent scholarship on violence in Latin America emphasizes the unprecedented increase of urban crime in the last decades, expressed in homicide rates, property crime or public security (Briceño León, 2002; Bergman, 2006), as opposed to former brands of more political violence during the sixties and seventies. This is a process closely linked to the dramatic effects of the 'package of free market reforms sponsored by states and multilateral organizations during the last decades of the twentieth century', amongst them the inevitable increase of social inequality (Roberts and Portes, 2006: 58). Although this rising trend in crime affects all of Latin America, placing the homicide rates of some of its cities among the highest in the world (Bergman, 2006: 223; Portes and Roberts, 2005), and leading the world statistics on firearm killings (Small Arms Survey, 2004)², authors such as Briceño León warn that the process is in no way homogeneous, as the highest occurrence takes place in countries and cities at the intersection of two main factors: high levels of poverty, and high intensification of urbanization (2002). The combination of these two factors is behind the fact that countries such as Venezuela, Colombia o El Salvador have higher crime rates than Costa Rica, Uruguay, Argentina or Chile. Recent figures place Venezuelan 'free market' cities, especially Caracas, Valencia or Maracaibo, amongst the most dangerous in the continent, with national homicide rates rising from 20-22 in 1994-1998 to 45 in 2006, being the most recent data in Caracas of 107 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in that same year. No public policies seem to have been successful in significantly turning the tide around so far.³

In fact, the decade of the nineties and the turn of the century are a stage in Venezuelan history that is heir to the social upheaval produced by the popular revolt (and subsequent repression carried out by the state's security forces) in February 1989, known as *El caracazo*. For a good number of authors this popular rebellion marked a highlight in the process of de-pacification of daily life undergone by Venezuelan citizens, especially in the *barrios*, where the permanent infiltration of violence in local systems and in the intimate spaces and routines of their

² The 2004 report states that Latin America concentrated 42% of the world's firearm homicides, with a rate of 15.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, followed at a distance by Africa with a 5.9 rate.

³ Although some of the crime (property and total crimes) indicators have slightly decreased since 2003 (PROVEA 2006:331), it is not possible to talk about a substantial turnaround associated to Chavez's tenure as, for example, homicides are not following the same trend. During my fieldwork in 1992-1995, total homicides ranged from 3.366 in 1992 to 4.733 in 1994 (PROVEA 2006: 337). In 1998, when Chavez was first running for the presidency, there were 4.550 homicides in Venezuela. The total of registered homicides in 2006 was 12.257, with an increase of 23% from 2005 (PROVEA, 2007:39). Thus, in eight years, the rate has triplicated. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), poverty levels in Venezuela have decreased from a rate of 55.6 in 1997 to 27.5 in 2007 (with extreme poverty going from 25.5 to 7.6 in the same period). Yet, in 2007, desnutrition levels remain at a 17% rate (one of the worsts in Latin America, according to FAO), informal economy –although decreasing– still accounts for 44% of all conomic activity, and unemployment accounts for 61% of the Economically Active Population (considering that 51,6% of occupied persons could not afford the basket of consumer goods). See PROVEA 2006; 2007.

inhabitants feeds a social landscape colored by resentment, upset and alarm.⁴ This de-pacification process acquires its specific morphology and signification in relation to the new profile adopted by violence in parallel to the historical development of Venezuelan society. As a culmination of older forms of violence and a “cultural matrix of violent conflict-resolution” present in Venezuela,⁵ Tulio Hernández has postulated a gradual installation in Venezuela since the eighties of a *cycle of de-centered violence*, arising from a collective feeling of *orphanage in the public sector*, and characterized by the preponderance of multiple, chaotic, disperse and fragmented social violence, with neither a dominant current nor definite outlines (1994:105-106). The multiplication and decentralization of the violence, and the loss of ideological or institutional references to some of it, make its continual and resounding eruption in the spaces of daily life even more disconcerting.

Although the increase of urban violence affects all Venezuelans, not all of them are affected equally. One of the most conspicuous battlefields in the Venezuelan *barrios* is organized around young people, an increasing number of whom are underage. Without doubt, as occurs in other contexts of poverty such as social segregation and lack of social and labor horizons, a good part of the violence which devastates the barrios is committed by young people against other young people. Struggles between armed gangs for areas of influence and networks in the drug trade, and the establishment of *la culebra*—the local variation of the string of deaths and blood vengeance— as an articulating axis of social relationships result in a chilling number of casualties, especially on weekends. This kind of confused and politically paralyzing violence originates, as Philippe Bourgois writes, as an alternative to social exclusion. It may be understood as an extreme form of “street resistance culture based in the destruction of its participants and of surrounding communities,” and has an unmistakable attraction for some of the young people who are born and grow up in its vicinity with no alternative source of economic resources, power or prestige (1995:9-11).

⁴ Loïc Wacquant uses the concept of “depacification of everyday life”, inspired by the work of Norbert Elias, to refer to the drift towards violence in the everyday life of the North American ghettos. According to Wacquant, for Elias violence and fear are situated at the “epicenter of the experience of modernity: together, they form the Gordian knot tying the outermost workings of the state to the innermost makeup of the person” (2004: 112). The relevance of these reflections in the case of Venezuela is plain, and is specially visible as expressed in the extreme forms of embodiment conforming the African and Viking spirits. About violence in Venezuela and about *El cacarazo*, see, for example, Ochoa Antic (1992), Ugalde *et al.* (1994), Tulio Hernández (1994: 77-126), Coronil (1997), Márquez (1999) and Tosca Hernández (2002).

⁵ Specifically, the cycle of “naturalization of private violence” (which stretches from the Independence War to the Gómez administration) and the cycle of “centralization of violence on the part of the State (which begins with Gomez and ends in the late 1960’s).

At the same time, in the successive cycles of the so-called *guerra al hampa* [war on street crime],⁶ many men of the barrios, particularly young men, are the object of indiscriminate policies of segregation, stigmatization, criminalization and even extermination on the part of the state and its various agents. Tulio Hernández describes an institutionalized violence, generally unpunished and imperfectly organized, against the inhabitants of the barrios which directly affects young men, and is expressed in police operations, assassinations, search and seizure, torture,⁷ arbitrary detention, and other forms of *police crime* (1994:93-94). The spectacular police operations, in which dozens—sometimes hundreds—of young people are arrested for the simple fact of having a certain color of skin (generally darker—*niche*— the higher up the steep hills where the barrios are found), for living in certain areas of the city, or dressing in consonance with the barrio culture, are the clearest example of how the authorities' logic of police intervention in the barrios has racial components and operates in an indiscriminate way.⁸ For Tosca Hernández (2002), one of the most perverse effects of these operations, apart from the massive propagation of suspicion, is the generation of criminal files on a grand scale, which pushes many young people into a blind alley. Another example of the repressive storm raining down on the youth of the barrios was the admission at the beginning of 2001 by Venezuela's General Attorney that the police had organized an *extermination plan* against street crime, which included summary executions.⁹ And yet another: not so long ago the Vice-Minister of Urban Security lamented that the police had executed around 2000 *pre-criminals* —i.e. potential criminals— between January and August 2000.¹⁰

The combination of processes which Wacquant considers decisive in the transformation of American ghettos into “the lethal machinery of stark social relegation”—that is to say, not only the de-pacification of daily life, but also the

⁶ For an analysis of this rhetorical discourse and its main impact on young people, see Márquez 1999, Ch 4.

⁷ See Márquez 1999:209-214.

⁸ Tulio Hernández identifies the indiscriminate procedure carried in these operations with that of *pesca de arrastre* or *trawling* (1994: 94).

⁹ See “Fiscal no niega que exista plan de exterminio contra delincuentes” (Attorney General does not deny that there is a plan to exterminate criminals), *EFE*, January 12, 2001. EFE picked up the denouncement made by PROVEA in its 1999 report, where it condemns the execution by the police of 116 people during that year (PROVEA, 1999).

¹⁰ According to this officer's own words: “This is a situation I regret, because we are talking here of young people that could have benefited from rehabilitation programs. But they leave us very few options when they start shooting each other or the police. (see “94 homicidios en todo el país” (94 homicides across the nation), *El Nacional*, 19 September 2000; see also Tosca Hernández, 2002 and Briceño León, 2002). In spite of this, he defended the way his men conducted themselves and encouraged citizens to act with the same determination. On the social legitimacy of the ‘right to kill’ making almost commonsensical such public statement, see Briceño León, Camardiel y Ávila, 2002.

organizational desertification and informalization of the economy (2004)—have obvious parallels in the steady consolidation of the popular barrios as *red – danger– zones* in the eyes of mainstream Venezuelan society. In the last decades, this combination has fostered in the barrios the expansion and consolidation of a mode of survival completely alien to the formal and legal welfare model, and which is characterized by economic informality and valuation both illegal and transgressive of social behavior. The cult of weapons, drug addiction, and the presence of death as an essential condition in social relationships are important elements in this mainly masculine expression of popular culture (Briceño León, 2002). In its most radical manifestations, honor and social prestige are based on local interpretations of qualities such as courage, daring, cruelty, power of seduction or indifference to death.¹¹ In short, to use the vernacular term, it is all about being as *arrecho* as you can.

This lifestyle matches the display of a specific corporeal style which absorbs and re-signifies the more tangible effects of every-day violence. In her research on street children in Caracas, Patricia Márquez analyzes the importance of wounds and scars as style and prestige markers in this context, alongside tattoos, piercings and other bodily inscriptions deriving from both local and global repertoires (1999:202-208). Marks of violence, each carrying its own particular legend, are evidence of the bearer's cunning in escaping danger and death *in extremis*, of survival skills gained in the mazes of the streets, of courage in facing pain, of indifference regarding the fate of their own lives and bodies, etc. In a very basic form, they show the presence of a street survivor, and thus become the main axis of social identity. The origin of this *social skin* (Turner, 1980) so valuable to many of the barrio youths is manifold. While some of the corporeal injuries can be attributed to random encounters with structural and everyday violence, some others, Márquez reminds us, are self-inflicted. Sometimes they are the expression of group and personal styles —tattoos, scars forming a specific pattern— other times they are short-term protective measures, for example to complicate being taken into custody, or to avoid attacks or rape while in prison (*ibid*). But the positive value of corporeal marks and wounds in the culture of some of the barrio youth, which leads to occasional self-production, has a counter-side with sometimes nefarious consequences. If we look at the meeting point of the bullets and knives of street violence as if looking at a map, says Inocenta, a young spiritist friend, the mere presence of the scars has the potential of *certifying* for many – including the police and other public authorities— the unmistakable condition of *malandro* on those who bear them.

¹¹ Pedrazinni and Sánchez have denominated this characteristic lifestyle of the barrios, which they consider a mixture of creativity and violence that has parallel manifestations in other Latinamerican contexts, *Emergency Culture (cultura de urgencia)* (1992:31).

Although this tragic street lifestyle is not the only one in the barrios, and it would be unfair to even consider it the dominant lifestyle, it may well be the one that, because of its special characteristics, has the greatest impact on the daily routines of these self-produced urban spaces. It impregnates a great number of social spaces with its implacable and terrible mechanisms, and it certainly enjoys a great deal of acceptance among the youngest sectors of the population. The young people more directly linked with criminal ways of survival, who, we must remember, are a minority of the population, participate fully in this culture. But many other youths whose horizons stretch farther than that are inevitably exposed to this culture every day, in their street encounters with gangs or police (whose members, in both cases, come mostly from the barrios). Young people at large, who experience this way of life in a more indirect fashion, are able in certain circumstances to cultivate its more tenuous forms, or activate its main external markers such as speech, corporality or dress.

In a previous discussion about the expansion of *malandro* (delinquent) spirits within the María Lionza cult (an expansion parallel to that of the African and Viking spirits, with similar links to the depacification of daily life) I argued that “*malandro*” and “*malandro* spirit medium” are categories which cannot be automatically associated. Many young spiritists who have no direct relation with crime host *malandro* spirits in trance, for example, as an identity resource to confront social stigma, to increase their social prestige or simply as a survival strategy to deal with complicated situations in the streets (Ferrándiz, 2004b). The same thing happens with the African and Viking spirits with which we deal in this paper. In the same way it is crucial to avoid any possible mechanical associations that may relate juvenile crime to spiritist contact with Africans and Vikings. As Daniel, a young spiritist, commented, “some of the boys who cut themselves the most in rituals turn out to be *good souls* in their own neighborhoods.” What brings together the youth of the barrios—whether dangerous criminals, petty thieves, honest workers or innocent souls—is the condition of being suspect of potential crime, of being pre-delinquents. As we have seen, being constructed as suspects by formal society, by its media machinery and its containment and control institutions has dire and specific consequences for all of them. We can consider, then, that this —the production, deepening and expansion of social stigma and its practical consequences— is the main unifying element, the one that most directly determines the way in which many young spiritists began to develop their relationship with spirits of violence as of the early 1990s, and continue to do so today. We shall now discuss who these mystical entities are, and what are the corporeal plots in which they unfold.

Wounded Memories

Just as societies are transformed, so the forms of corporality in their midst are modulated, renewed and continuously reinvented. Therefore, bodies may be used as analytical road maps, as entry- and exit-points to and from social, political and economic processes such as those discussed in the first part of the paper. Kleinman and Kleinman have described this process as an intricate dialectic of *infolding* and *outfolding* of both the social and the corporeal (1994: 710-711). In Venezuelan spiritism, transformations of the corporeal performances are constant—always ingrained with changes at the social, political, economic and everyday levels—although they are in some instances hardly perceptible in the short term. The place where the transformative quality of this cult can be most easily perceived is in its broad and malleable pantheon of spirits. Although in the cult of Maria Lionza it is possible to talk about a ‘sense of familiarity’, there is not a unified doctrine, there are many different ways of practicing it and the forms of embodiment of the different categories of spirits change over time, being controversy the rule of the game. The pantheon is broadly organized in *cortes*—categories or ‘courts’—of spirits, which in some cases overlap and whose members are often in dispute. It has a more stable core, occupied by the *cortes* which are considered ‘traditional’ by many cultists—*india* (natives from colonial times), *chamarrera* (regional healers), *libertadora* (heroes from the independence wars), *médica* (biomedical doctors), *celestial* (Celestial), and some others. Then there is a more volatile periphery which contains minority or ephemeral *cortes* such as the *cubana* (Cuban), *egipcia* (Egyptian), *nenés* (kids), etc, where spirits or categories of spirits come in and out of fashion. There, the faithful absorb and constantly re-elaborate elements of various natures and origins—from popular, massive or elite culture—within the logic of spiritism. This creativeness at the periphery of the pantheon occasionally produces spiritist configurations which for different reasons become tuned to broadly shared sensibilities among the faithful and Venezuelan society at large, turn popular, and manage to penetrate the more stable center of the practice. This is the case of the spirits of *malandros* or delinquents (Ferrándiz 2004b) and the Africans and Vikings, offsprings as well as stunning manifestation of the depacification process described above. Both spiritist configurations swiftly moved from the periphery to the center of the pantheon in the early nineties, where the healing ceremony narrated at the beginning of this paper took place. Today, despite some attempts to curtail and even expel these newer types of spiritism from the mountain of Sorte, they continue to be amongst the most popular, particularly for young mediums and, in the case of the Africans and Vikings, their dramatic and highly controversial embodiment style has deeply influenced the practice globally, as well as its perception by Venezuelan society at large.

In general, these spirits of violence have several characteristics which set them apart from the Indians, the liberators, the doctors, the malandros and the *chamarreros*. In the first place, they are mainly associated with young and middle age mediums (as is also the case with the delinquent spirits) and are often rejected or at least notched down by many mediums from the older generations. Second, Africans and Vikings are many times ambiguously mixed up into a single court, the *red court*, where they are difficult to discern, sharing the same corporeality and many of the ritual attributes, symbolism, and healing techniques. Third, they have developed an extremely forced and rather unusual corporality, expressed in contorted —almost skeletal— body movements and a hard-to-understand speech in which Spanish, English and sometimes Portuguese are often mixed. In the last few years, some Africans have developed a jargon identified by the faithful as Yoruba.¹² Fourth, the medium's ritual display is largely based on self-inflicted injury of various types —cuts with knives or razors, piercings with needles, ingestion of limited amounts of glass or toxic liquids such as kerosene— a type of display that is irrelevant, nonexistent or off-limits in other courts. Fifth, mediums in trance with them take on a competitive dynamic more directly associated with youth street culture, as we showed in the opening of this article, than with spiritualism. The risk to which the mediums subject themselves has been increasing gradually since the nineties as the needles used in piercing are larger, the knife-wounds deeper, closer to more sensitive parts of the body, and new tools of self-mutilation are introduced. Sixth, the aesthetics resulting from progressive ceremonial self-mutilation practices are closely connected to shantytown and jail bodily styles and practices —particularly as it relates to body piercing and tattooing—, incorporating a local take of punk and popularized baroque imageries of the crucifixion: mediums walk with arms spread open, like crucified Christs. The mediums' blood is the main healing element around which mystic therapy is organized (PIC 3 ABOUT HERE).

There is one more aspect, a vital one for spiritist possession, in which African and Viking spirits have made significant innovations: the threads of memory—or as Yolanda Salas more precisely terms it in her article on the cult of African and Viking spirits in Venezuelan prisons, the *re-creations of forgetfulness* (1998:23)—into which mystical entities are solidified during trance. We are working from the understanding that African and Viking spirits have a meaningful relationship with the de-pacification process that the Venezuelan barrios are undergoing, and that the corporality and memory accumulated in the mediums are a clear reference to that process. At the same time, however, this spiritist configuration has unexpectedly acquired a meaning that transcends this specific link of the chain. In a peculiar fulfillment of the dialectic between the tragedies of the past and the present suggested by Galeano in one of the quotes that head this article (1973),

¹² Thanks to Roger Canals for pointing my attention to this recent development.

some of these emerging mystical entities joined from the beginning a current of popular memory about the times of slavery in Venezuela. As Connerton points out, the oral history of subordinate groups has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the official historiographies; they are “altogether another story.” Not only do they differ in the details that make up the narrative, but they organize their meaning following different principles and rhythms (1989: 76). We are therefore talking about a popular memory which operates at the fringes of official historiography; a fragmented, diffuse and imperfectly made up memory inhabited by a chaotic mixture of archetypal characters (who transmit essentialized notions of the slavery period) and more recognizable characters with local biographical threads (who in turn recover more concrete events of violence and resistance, whether real or imaginary). This mixture remains permanently open to multiple and situational interpretations.

We now ask, from the perspective of popular memory: who are these African and Viking spirits? What relationship could exist between them? So far apart geographically, historically and culturally, according to the cult’s inner logic they should have been in *cortes* of their own. Why then were they reduced to a single *corte* under the unifying will of Queen María Lionza? My long term field work took place between 1992 and 1995. During those years the novelty and success of these spirits among young mediums prevented me from gathering sufficiently articulated testimonies about their nature and meaning. No one knew unmistakably what they were about. All the marialionceros to whom I spoke agreed that Africans and Vikings belonged to the same category of spirits. Their language, corporality and therapeutic style were mostly indistinguishable. There was not agreement in every case as to who was African and who Viking. Sometimes characters seemed to amalgamate in an overarching *red court*. It was not unusual either that a single spirit might ‘come down’ interchangeably in his or her ‘Viking’ or ‘African’ persona without modifying the ritual performance. After quite a few years, what at first might have seemed to be a lack of definition associated to their novelty and swift success, has nonetheless become the normal state of affairs.

What seems to bind them together since they came into being in Venezuelan spiritism is their warrior nature, their declared struggle for freedom, and the intensity of their excessive, wounded and mutilated corporeal language. But while the narratives circulating about the Vikings —Mr. Vikingo, Mr. Robinson, Erik, Alondra, Mr. Bárbaro, etc.— are in general thin heroic sagas, mostly taken from comic books (for example Prince Valiant, whose iconography is very like that of statues and saint-stamps) and historical films, often times those about Africans are more complex and varied. Here we shall focus on the African component of the mixture, since the main element that the Vikings bring —their condition as indomitable warriors— is also present in the Africans. Some of the Africans are reincarnations of Orixás coming from Cuban Santería such as Santa Bárbara, Changó, Obatalá, or the *Siete Potencias* (Seven Powers). Others remain

generically in the category of aboriginal inhabitants of Africa. A few others, like the African Centaurs, are hybrids between animals and humans, in this case, a man and a horse. But most of them—Negro Congo, Chambelé, etc— are historically associated to *maroons*, that is, are collectively interpreted as former runaway Venezuelan slaves, who escaped the plantations and the control of the authorities and the Spanish elite¹³.

We will now look in more detail at the corporeal display these spirits offer in possession. This is how Teresa, a middle-aged *materia* who receives African and Viking spirits in her body but resists the violence often associated with them, described Mr. Bárbaro —Mr. Barbarian— for me. In the framework of the widespread ambiguity about these spirits, she considered Mr. Bárbaro to be African, and not Viking —as he is more often believed to be —, and associated his twisted corporality to slavery mutilations.

[When Mr. Bárbaro arrives] in your body, you feel a sort of rage. Most times it *feels as if you were full of rage inside*; you feel it right inside. Then you think: this spirit is going to come in cutting and jabbing, wielding a machete. I get very scared then... This Bárbaro, I'll describe him for you: he is tall, really tall, thick, his hair is this beautiful afro. He was the most *arrecho*, bravest of them all, like Guaicaipuro for his tribe. *They would take him prisoner and he'd escape. So they cut off his leg so he would not run away again, and still, leg or no leg, he ran away again. They had him locked up because he was a slave. Well they chopped of his leg, and he kept bugging them. So they chopped off his hand, too. His left hand. That's how come all African spirits come down with a twisted foot, to honor him. Bárbaro twists his hand because it's been chopped off. When the spiritual fluid is entering your body [in the first stage of trance] you can feel there is no hand. Same thing with the foot, you can feel the missing foot* (italics mine).

As Teresa suggests, the rebelliousness of the African spirits is expressed in various forms through the body. One of them is the kind of emotional state they elicit from the medium. The majority of the spiritists linked to these spirits talk of feelings such as rage, fury, frustration, courage, daring, valor, fierceness, etc. Generally these feelings are massive, overwhelming, similar to the asphyxia described earlier by Daniel; they take an enormous physical and psychological toll on mediums. The case of Jose Luis in the ceremony described at the beginning of this article also illustrates the extremes of severity trance with these spirits can involve; the trance they bring is harder than that of most other spirits in the María Lionza pantheon. According to the mechanisms of popular Venezuelan memory, which so favors tragic and heroic narratives, these feelings express the experience of the defeated warriors, history's losers, who drag with them the deep

¹³They are not, however, the first slaves to reach the cult. There were a few others in the pantheon which go far back, such as the well-known Negro Miguel, leader of the famous Buría slave uprising in 1552, or Negro Pío, who attempted to kill Bolívar. This previous lineage of spirits is for the most part assimilated to the category of the *chamarreros*, whose style of corporeality is much lighter than that of African spirits. They have no relation with mediums' self-inflicted wounds or with the therapeutic use of blood, and generally frame their performances in obscene and funny registers.

disappointment of defeat but also the commitment to permanent resistance and rebelliousness.

At the same time, African spirits inscribe on the bodies of the mediums other traces of their experience of slavery, in the form of wounds and mutilations. One of the most frequent means of expressing these historical wounds is the sensation during trance, in the moments previous to loss of consciousness, of what could be called *spaces of sensorial emptiness*: “It feels as though there were nothing here.” These spaces represent the punishment and torture inflicted upon slaves by the various colonial agents for their rebelliousness.¹⁴ Aside from the subjective sensations of the medium while receiving the spiritual fluids, these lesions appear clearly for those watching the trance. As already stated, almost all African spirits display a deformed corporality: they move around spasmodically, as if they were skeletons with no muscles or articulations, and limp visibly, with at least one foot turned inwards or an arm hanging stiffly by the trunk. As Teresa tells, these defects are often explained as punitive amputations of feet, arms or hands. One other way in which the violence of slavery is portrayed is, as mentioned before, the self-infliction of razor, knife or needle wounds. The bodies of young *materias*, with their veins cut open, are bathed in blood during the course of the ceremony as a way to explicitly evoke the pain of the wolf traps, iron-branding, whippings and other colonial punishments.

African spirits enter the bodies of the mediums as wounded, rebellious, wrathful memories, and in doing so give the lie to the models—which Acosta Saignes has called idyllic and calumnious—of colonial domination and the irrelevant and inferior role of slaves at the time, so frequently used in black people’s official historiography in Venezuela (1984:16).¹⁵ But this is not just about the critical re-creation of one of the most dreadful periods in Venezuela’s history. Such an explicit representation of the nature of colonial Venezuela’s regime resonates with the cruelty of street violence of the free market cities of contemporary Venezuela, whose protagonists, either more or less diluted, are the descendants of those same slaves.

Streets Embodied

The arrival of Africans and Vikings into spiritism and the rising violence to which they subject their *materias* transformed the whole corporeal surface in a

¹⁴ About punishment and torture inflicted on slaves, ranging from whippings and wolf traps to mutilation, see Acosta Saignes 1984: 243-261.

¹⁵ About the trivialization and criminalization of colonial slaves in a significant part of Venezuelan historiography, see also García 1989.

territory homologous to the so-call red zones —those hit hardest by urban violence. It is here on this canvas of wounds and mutilations where we must search for the continuity between ritual and every-day violence. It seems clear that African and Viking spirits are part of that male cultural trend in the barrios characterized by the exaltation of competition and attitudes such as daring, challenging danger, or being indifferent to pain, and based on the prestige that wounds and scars confer (PIC 4 ABOUT HERE). Although some critics have denounced this corporeal trend as a passing, baseless youth fad, or even as a deceitful practice, young mediums place great value on the courage displayed by those who willingly submit to this type of physical violence as well as on the ability to produce the spectacular images and performances that include piercing, jabbing and bloodshed. Spiritists themselves establish, as Luis did, a parallel between this type of trance and youth or warrior initiation rites.¹⁶

What we have here is a *barrio rite*. Not so much a spiritual rite as a barrio rite. Courage is something important; *people think that, look, the one whose body has more wounds is all of a sudden the bravest*, and then wouldn't cutting someone up, if that person survives the cuts, give one some pints, too? I imagine you can show this off in some circles. Take the Africans, or the Indians; they were people to whom courage meant a lot... And they had *initiation or courage rites, warrior rites....* Initiations were painful, had to be painful —how else does the warrior learn to stand physical pain? What other way is there to stand physical pain other than getting used to it? (*italics mine*)

Although at some point most young mediums have to face the arrival of African and Viking spirits, whether or not they wish for it, not all of them are willing to yield their bodies unconditionally to the violence these spirits bring. Often there are negotiations and limits are established to the kinds of risk mediums are willing to take. Rubén, for example —a young medium from Catia la Mar on the central coast— refused to allow John Charles, the African spirit that possessed him frequently, to cut him up unless it was absolutely necessary for the ritual healing he was performing. Rubén would instruct his assistants before each ceremony, and they usually would not hand the spirit the sharp objects he requested each time he possessed Rubén. “People might think I am a *malandro* if I am covered in scars,” he said to me. It was just a rhetorical statement. His body was already full of scars and already belonged to the wounds of the streets and of popular memory.

The young people who practice this kind of spiritualism regularly have already trained, or *produced*, their bodies for the ceremonies of bloodshed and violence. The scars and blisters which cover their chests, forearms and thighs, carefully cultivated in one possession after another, bleed profusely even with superficial cuts. Needle piercings are usually only skin-deep, and their proximity to dangerous areas of the body, as in Jose Luis' neck piercing near the jugular, is

¹⁶ Yolanda Salas highlights this aspect in her article about African and Viking spirits in Venezuelan prisons (1998).

only apparent. In fact, those spiritists who are most critical of *materias* who work with African and Viking spirits argue that the violence seen in these ceremonies is not *real violence*, but part of an easy *show* meant to impress a gullible audience.

Nevertheless, for the audience, the *effect* is that of painful and dangerous wounds, and of obvious risk to the personal integrity of the medium. Because trance has analgesic properties, usually there is no pain. But even if mediums do not feel pain during trance, they are able to manage well what Scarry calls the *vicinity of pain*, and effectively confer to those present the “anguish of the wounded person” (1985:15). Many young spiritists establish direct correlations between the historical experience of slavery—as it is transmitted and transformed in popular memory and in the sensorial fields of possession—and their everyday-life in oil-era Venezuela through their successive trances with African and Viking spirits, or often just by participating in these ceremonies. This parallel, which is updated in each trance or ceremony, is far from perfect, and the source of controversy among spiritists. But the feeling that, in the end, they “are the same people” and that exploitation and violence from both periods is comparable sets in movement an elliptically charged identity process which has the potential to re-interpret contemporary experiences of exclusion from the perspective of a peculiar corporeal memory of slavery.

Open Veins

We come back to *Open Veins*. This time we will use the disturbing image of the dispossession and pillage evoked by Eduardo Galeano in his classic book about Latin America both metaphorically and literally. The literal interpretation supposes walking the path between the structural exclusion and violence Galeano denounced in the early seventies—and the more recent mutations via the neoliberal models dominating Latin America in the following decades—and the every-day experience of impoverished and stigmatized Venezuelans whose horizon of possibilities is nil. The wounds inflicted by the spirits during trance are fused and mixed with the marks left on their bodies by urban abandonment, poverty and malnutrition, the inadequacy of health services, street fights, prison and police repression, and by the aesthetical manipulations of youth subcultures. The blood that runs from the bodies of mediums is but another small affluent in the river of blood that runs every day down the streets of the *barrios*. Like history, the rituals and the streets *share the same wounds and scars*.

Structural violence, as Bourdieu reminds us, is paid in a multitude of smaller or larger acts of every-day violence (1997). But the causal links that go from one type of violence to the other are not automatic, and the significance of the acts and paths of violence is not univocal. Structural poverty and social exclusion generate

ways of life and of survival that are remarkably ambiguous, and at the same time partly alienating and liberating. Thus it is difficult to discern if the violence of African and Viking spirits expresses pure self-destructive hopelessness or whether it is a means of empowering and claiming some social and expressive space for a youth tragically despoiled and identified with the great epics, real and imaginary, of the Nordic sagas and the resistance to slavery. Most likely, as a paradigm of the new decentralized violence of which Tulio Hernández speaks, they are both things at the same time—in unstable combination.

That being as it may, going back to the ceremony described at the beginning of this article, the fact that a brief moment of tenderness can therapeutically infiltrate a ritual structure accosted by two violent attacks—from the everyday violence which destroyed Morrongo's future—as it does with many other young people in similar circumstances—and from the ritual violence—that provides young spiritists with the heroic yarns to cruelly strike their own bodies and affective structures—reminds us of the weariness felt by a generation of young people towards the intolerable conditions of their everyday lives, and also of the possibility, perhaps utopian, that violence is reaching the threshold of tolerance from where it can begin to subside.

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